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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes a three-part project designed collaboratively by a university professor and a public school teacher to increase teaching interns' knowledge, awareness, and skill in conceptualizing and intervening with challenging students and better prepare them for persisting in the classroom. Participants were 64 undergraduate students. The first session focused on how basic "survival" counseling skills could help them be more effective teachers, reinforcing the notion that teachers are the first line of defense in identifying and intervening with students who bring a variety of psychological and emotional baggage to school. The second session began by asking participants how they applied information from the first session in their classrooms, then worked to help participants understand that challenging students are discouraged and in need of encouragement. It also taught the rational-emotive behavior therapy model, expanded on the conceptual framework of reality therapy, and included a group activity in which participants were asked to "think outside the box" about their roles as teachers. The final session focused on components of the program that had been attempted in the field and the perceived results. Participants overwhelmingly considered the program successful. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

## Survival Counseling Skills for New Teachers

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## Abstract

Teachers in the contemporary classroom perform a variety of additional duties. Counseling is a frequently cited additional duty, yet an orientation to basic counseling skills is not included in teacher preparation programs. This requires the new teacher to improvise on the job...a difficult task considering many students bring years of psychological and emotional baggage that negatively impacts their learning. Survival counseling skills for new teachers was a three-part program, collaboratively developed and presented by a public school teacher and a university professor. Our goal was to increase teaching interns knowledge, awareness, and skill in conceptualizing and intervening with challenging students and to better prepare them for persisting in the classroom.

## Survival Counseling Skills for New Teachers

At a recent conference on school-university partnership, the Texas Education Agency Commissioner of Education echoed the words of teachers across the state: “Don’t forget to tell them what we really do...counseling, special education, discipline, and all the other non-teaching duties” (Alanis, 2002). As a counselor educator, I frequently ask my students, “Why are you interested in becoming a school counselor?” The response is consistent and resembles, “we ‘counsel’ anyway so we may as well do it formally.”

Counseling, whether formal or informal, is a familiar role to teachers. Three decades ago, teachers’ competence was measured and evaluated using a six-point star (National IOTA Council, 1972). The “Star Teacher” model identified six areas of teacher responsibility: (1) Director of Learning, (2) Member of the Teaching Profession, (3) Member of the Staff, (4) Link with the Community, (5) Mediator of the Culture, and (6) **Counselor** and Advisor. Each area was directly related to teacher effectiveness and deficiencies in any area were perceived as a “warning sign of ineffectiveness” (p. 22).

Since the 1970’s, however, it is interesting to note the paucity of direct reference in the literature to teachers’ ascribed counseling role. Indirectly, teachers are cited as being instrumental in enhancing accurate self-concepts among minority exceptional learners (Obiakor, 1999), career counseling (Smith, 2000), and responders to oppositional, defiant, and socially inept behaviors (Eddy, Reid, & Fetrow, 2000). Teachers’ in all 50 states are legally mandated to report suspicions of child abuse, yet in a study by Hinson and Fossey (2000), 75% of the teachers surveyed reported that they were unfamiliar with the signs of abuse. To the degree that teachers are called upon to engage

in any of the above “counseling related” functions, one must ask the question, “when and where are they receiving the training to do so?”

We initially reviewed the program requirements for teacher certification within the Texas A&M University System. Finding no requirement for a basic counseling skills course among any of the programs, we reviewed the requirements of numerous teacher-training programs across the country and found consistent results. That is, programs may require courses that resemble “classroom management,” yet none specifically focused on the types of issues cited in the literature review. Further, Goldberg and Proctor (2000) conducted a survey on teacher recruitment and retention and found that 85.5 percent believed that new teachers need more training in classroom management skills. Training in counseling skills could effectively address this issue. Therefore, a program was initiated and funded by the Texas A&M University System Regents’ Initiative to provide what was termed basic “survival” counseling skills for new teachers. The program was further established to reflect the collaborative spirit that exists between education at the K-12 level and the local university. Co-presenters included a third grade classroom teacher who is also a graduate student in the school counseling program at Texas A&M International University and a counselor education professor at the same university.

#### Program Objectives

It should be noted that we are not training teachers to be counselors, rather to provide new teachers with basic “survival” counseling strategies relevant to the classroom. Knowledge, awareness, and basic “survival” counseling skill may alleviate many of the classroom discipline problems adversely impacting so many learners in the contemporary classroom. Further, competence in “survival” counseling skills can be

used by the teacher him or herself to enhance coping strategies and concomitantly reduce the negative effects of classroom distress. We were also interested in helping new teachers become familiar with the overall scope of counseling and related services to better serve their students with appropriate referral.

#### Procedures

Participants consisted of 64 undergraduate students (four male and 60 female) enrolled in the teacher Internship experience during the Fall 2002 semester at Texas A&M International University. Nearly all of the participants were of Hispanic origin (n=63).

The program was conducted over a period of three months. The first session was held in August 2002 just prior to beginning the internship; the second session was held in the first week of October 2002; and the final session was completed during the last week of October 2002. Each session was approximately three hours in duration.

#### Session 1

The first session provided a general orientation to the program. The purpose was discussed from the perspective of how basic "survival" counseling skills will help the participants in the classroom to be more effective teachers. We discussed the need for a conceptual framework from which to begin to answer such questions as, "hummm, now why did my student do that?" A primary focus of this session was to reinforce the notion that teachers are the first line of defense in identifying and intervening with students who bring a variety of psychological and emotional baggage to school.

We discussed the need for establishing and maintaining a positive working relationship with their students based on mutual trust and respect. The non-directive

counseling approach proposed by Rogers (1980) can be used to assist new teachers in this respect. Three “core conditions” were discussed that provide the structure for establishing and maintaining relationships. First, displaying unconditional positive regard (UPR) can help the teacher focus on caring and acceptance of the student even if his or her behavior is inappropriate. Second, displaying congruence in the classroom refers to the degree to which the teacher is “real” or genuine as a person. If the new teacher has selected the teaching profession for the “right reasons,” he or she will likely display care and concern for the rights, dignity, and welfare of students. They will display congruence, as there will be a natural manifestation of what they think and feel about their chosen profession. Finally, accurate empathic understanding considers the teachers’ ability to capture the subjective world of the student. For example, what must it be like for a third grade child to come to school who has little food or love from home? What if he or she gets little sleep because the parents are fighting all night? What if the child is being abused? How would these issues impact one’s interest in a standardized test? Building relationships with students is a continuous process. Keeping the core conditions in mind and actively modeling them can facilitate and strengthen the process.

Building relationships with our students is a necessary, yet insufficient condition for positive change to occur in the classroom. Many times we find students who present behaviors that make it difficult for us to get beyond a superficial level of understanding of their life situation. Challenges to academic success may lie below the psychological surface and demand that we better understand what basic human needs or wants are driving the behavior. In this respect, we discussed the practical application of Reality Therapy (Glasser, 2000). Glasser contended that all behavior is driven by five basic

human needs: Power, fun, freedom, belonging, and survival. The participants were provided operational definitions of each, divided into groups, issued real-world scenarios, and asked to discuss which primary need/want was in operation. The groups also acted out self-made skits reflecting situations they projected they would see in the classroom. Understanding the underlying motivations for any behavior can help make difficult behaviors less mystical.

## Session 2

The second session began with a review of the first session and discussion from the participants as to how the information was applied in their classroom. As with all strategies, some work better than others at different times. We wanted the participants to have two additional models from which to conceptualize student behavior. First, we discussed some key concepts from Adlerian Therapy (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). The basic premise of this orientation begins with the asserted conclusion that the challenging student is not a “nut and in need of intense psychotherapy,” but rather is discouraged and in need of encouragement. We helped the participants to see the discouraged student’s “lifestyle” from his or her unique spectacles. A simple technique to better appreciate a student’s lifestyle is to ask the student to complete the following sentences: “I am \_\_\_\_\_. The world is \_\_\_\_\_. Therefore \_\_\_\_\_.” Clearly, the language used to develop a picture of the student’s lifestyle must be appropriate and can be modified to fit various populations.

An additional approach covered in this session was Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (Ellis & Dryden, 1997). The basic premise of this model asserts that people have the capacity for both “rational” and for “irrational” (sometimes called “crooked”)



thinking. This model is especially popular with elementary school teachers as the “ABC’s” are emphasized. “A” represents the activating event. That is, what happened in the string of events that lead to a specific problematic behavior? Jose is sitting minding his own business and Alfred calls him an uncomplimentary name. Jose punches Alfred and gets sent to the dungeon for in-school suspension. Jose deals with the “C” or consequence of his actions. The consequence in this model is an affective, or feeling, consequence. He may be angry, embarrassed, sad, worried, and etc. What is most important, however, is not what happened or what his feelings were as a result. The “B” or belief he attaches to the incident and whether the belief leads to “rational” or “crooked” thinking is most important. Participants processed scenarios and were given strategies to dispute irrational thinking that leads to problematic behaviors.

The conceptual framework of Reality Therapy (Glasser, 2000) as presented in the first session was revisited and expanded to include the procedures. The model also employs the alphabet soup and is referred to as W D E P (Wubbolding, 2000). The “W” reflecting the question “What do you want?” The “D” soliciting “What are you doing to get what you want?” The “E” calls for an evaluation of whether what one is doing is getting him or her what is wanted. Finally, the “P” leads to a collaboratively developed plan that is simple, immediate, attainable, measurable, and committed. When determining what is wanted in the first stage of the procedure, it is important to consider the level of attachment the student has to the perceived want. For example, a student who claims to want all “A’s” in school may on the surface appear to possess a positive desire. The student appears to be doing all the customary things that would lead to the desired result. The student evaluates his behavior in getting what he wants and is still falling

short. A logical and natural plan may be to increase the required study time. Upon reevaluation the student still is falling short of the goal. If the student has been attached to the goal because of unrelenting pressure to perform from home, and the student is incapable of achieving at the desired level, we may be setting the student up for failure. Indeed, in some most unfortunate situations...suicide. Therefore, participants are encouraged to take some time to explore what is driving the perceived outcome and what their world would be like if they don't get it.

The final component of this session involved a group activity in which participants were asked to be creative in how they approach their role as teachers. Kriegel (1991) encouraged professionals in all professions to consider the statement "If it ain't broke...Break it!" and points to education as one profession that can certainly benefit from "break it thinking." "Break it" thinking is necessary when dealing with the complex issues that are internalized by our nation's youth. It is helpful in lighting the fire and passion in new teachers who have many excellent ideas but get "fire hosed" in the teachers' lounge by seasoned veterans. All too often they hear "that will never work...we don't have the funding...administration won't support it...it's been tried and failed in the past." The fire in the heart that once drove a teacher to the profession is extinguished. Some leave the profession while others merely retire on active duty and take up fire hoses of their own. We adapted Kriegel's fire hose activity by providing each participant a squirt gun. Yes, some were the small brightly colored pistol-looking ones, but we also had available animals that squirted water for the less belligerent members. Each group, armed with water, would offer brainstormed ideas of how the classroom could be more creative, productive, positive, and etc. Any group member who

provided negative feedback would immediately be squirted with water and reminded that they just fire hosed a colleague's potentially brilliant idea. We discovered from the participants that the activity really served as a stress reduction technique. We also discovered that water was everywhere.

### Session 3

The final session focused on components of the program that had been attempted in the field and the perceived result. The overwhelming response from the participants was that the program had been successful and that they believed that they were better prepared to deal with challenging behaviors and issues of their students. They also indicated that the "survival" counseling skills were valuable to them as individuals as well. We processed the need for new teachers to feel connected to the system they serve and considered the many support and referral sources that are available to help them personally and professionally. Specifically, we discussed the role of the school counselor as is now mandated by Texas state law. We considered their role in identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect and the appropriate referral sources in this regard. We hope that each participant was left with a better understanding of how they can positively intervene with each student in their classroom, to make well-informed referrals to other professionals when necessary, and to monitor their own wellness to persist in the teaching profession.

### Summary

It is widely accepted that teachers at all levels do far more in the classroom than just teach. Counseling is frequently cited as an additional duty that is assumed but for which little or no training is provided in teacher education programs. It is also

acknowledged that increasing numbers of students are arriving in the contemporary classroom with psychological and emotional baggage that impedes their academic progress. Discouraged youth frequently exhibit problematic behaviors for which new teachers are unprepared. The unfortunate result is teacher strain and subsequent drain from the profession. This collaborative project has provided a brief orientation to “survival” counseling skills that may prove effective in assisting all students achieve to their highest potential while at the same time, encouraging and empowering new teachers to persist in an honorable profession. The efficacy of the program has been supported and has resulted in the establishment of a similar class that will be required of all students in the teacher education program at Texas A&M International University beginning the Fall 2003 semester.

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